NCA
VOC FOR IOP/FN
BACKGROUNDER NO. 5-5631 MARCH 20, 197
HARRY DEBELIUS/MADRID

GIBRALTAR

ANNCR:

THERE IS A CHANGE IN THE WAY THE TALKS ON THE FUTURE OF GIBRALTAR ARE BEING CARRIED OUT THESE DAYS. HARRY DEBELIUS HAS THIS BACKGROUND REPORT FROM MADRID.

VOICE:

THERE IS A NOTICEABLE AIR OF CORDIALITY ON THE PART OF BOTH SPANISH OFFICIALS AND BRITISH DIPLOMATS HERE IN MADRID, FOLLOWING THE MEETING IN PARIS ABOUT THE FUTURE OF GIBRALTAR. THE ROCK OF GIBRALTAR HAS BEEN UNDER BRITISH CONTROL FOR ALMOST TWO AND A HALF CENTURIES. BUT SPAIN WANTS IT BACK. TENSE RELATIONS BETWEEN THE TWO POWERS OVER THE GIBRALTAR ISSUE LED, IN GENERAL FRANCO'S LIFETIME, TO A SPANISH DECISION TO CUT OFF ALL DIRECT CONTACTS BETWEEN THE NARROW ROCKY PENINSULA AND SPAIN. SINCE NINETEEN SIXTY-EIGHT, THE LAND BORDER HAS BEEN CLOSED AND EVEN TELEPHONE LINES WERE CUT OFF EXCEPT FOR A FEW DAYS AT CHRISTMAS THOSE YEARS.

THE ONLY WAY TO REACH TO GIBRALTAR FROM ALGECIRAS IN SOUTHERN SPAIN, JUST ACROSS THE BAY WITHIN SIGHT OF THE BRITISH CROWN COLONY, WAS TO TAKE THE FERRY TO MOROCCO, AND THEN TAKE ANOTHER FERRY BACK ACROSS THE STRAIGHT TO GIBRALTAR. THE ONLY TO PHONE GIBRALTAR FROM SPAIN WAS VIA LONDON. BUT THERE ARE SIGNS OF A CLIMATE OF UNDERSTANDING. FOR ONE THING, THE SPANISH GOVERNMENT OPENED UP THE TELEPHONE AND TELEX LINES LAST DECEMBER AND LEFT THEM OPENED. FOR ANOTHER, SPANISH OFFICIALS ARE TALKING ABOUT OFFERING THE GIBRALTARIANS A CONSIDERABLE DEGREE OF SELF-GOVERNMENT PROVIDED BRITAIN WILL FORMALLY RECOGNIZE SPANISH SOVEREIGNTY OVER THE DISPUTED TERRITORY.

THE HOME RULE OFFER COULD NOT HAVE BEEN MADE UNDER GENERAL FRANCO. HE BELIEVED IN A STRONG CENTRAL GOVERNMENT. BUT IN POST-FRANCO SPAIN, THE MADRID GOVERNMENT IS WILLINGLY SHARING SOME OF ITS POWERS WITH NEW REGIONAL GOVERNMENTS LIKE THOSE IN CATALONIA AND THE BASQUE COUNTRY. ALL THE REGIONS ARE PART OF SPAIN UNDER THE NEW CONCEPT, BUT LOCAL AFFAIRS WILL BE IN THE HANDS OF REGIONAL GOVERNMENTS.

ONE IMPORTANT NEW FEATURE IN THE TALKS BETWEEN THE TWO POWERS ABOUT THE EVENTUAL DECOLONIZATION OF GIBRALTAR IS THAT SPAIN NOW APPEARS TO ACCEPT THE LONG STANDING BRITISH ARGUMENT THAT ANY DECISION ON THE FUTURE OF GIBRALTAR MUST TAKE INTO ACCOUNT THE WISHES OF THE RESIDENTS. THAT'S WHY AT THE MEETING IN PARIS LAST WEDNESDAY, THERE WAS NOT ONLY A BRITISH AND A SPANISH DELEGATION, THERE WERE ALSO REPRESENTATIVES OF THE GIBRALTAR GOVERNMENT AND THE MAJOR GIBRALTAR OPPOSITION PARTY.

THE SPANISH GOVERNMENT IS COMMITTED TO A POLICY OF WORKING FOR THE RECOVERY OF GIBRALTAR. BUT SPAIN MAY NOT BE IN SUCH A HURRY. KING HASSAN OF MOROCCO HAS SAID THAT IF GIBRALTAR IS RETURNED TO SPAIN, SPAIN SHOULD SURRENDER ITS TWO ENCLAVES ON THE NORTH AFRICAN COAST -- CEUTA AND MELILIA -- TO MOROCCO.

JS/RCS